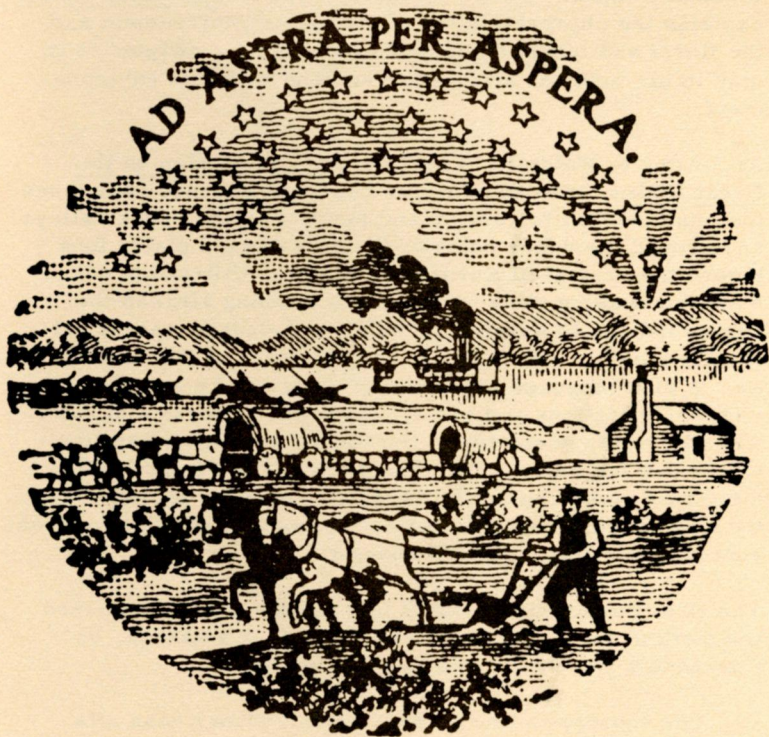


# The Kansas Plains



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TRAVELLING ACROSS KANSAS from east to west, one is aware of a transition from the tall grass Prairie Plains with wooded valleys to the flat, treeless, arid High Plains of western Kansas. Walter Prescott Webb in The Great Plains explains the characteristics of the plains environment and the floral and faunal communities which have adapted to it; man in his turn has also had to contend with this environment.

According to Waldo R. Wedel in Prehistoric Man on the Great Plains, man had devised basic subsistence techniques that enabled him to survive and function in the creek valleys and around the water holes of the short-grass plains long before the arrival of European settlers. Utilization of the bison for making tools, shelter and clothing allowed the Plains Indians to survive. Their earth-lodges were a relatively efficient adaptation to the extremes of Plains weather. A sign language system employing smoke signals, mirror reflections and bodily movement of horse and rider was extremely adaptable to the Plains where one can literally see for miles in all directions. The Plains Indians attempted some control of the environment by periodic burning of the grassland, but according to Wedel, the actual extent of this factor is still undetermined.

The first Europeans to travel through the area established the myth of the Great American Desert. Castaneda, on Coronado's expedition into Kansas, stated:

The country is like a bowl, so that when a man sits down, the horizon surrounds him all around at the distance of a musket shot. There are no groves of trees except at the rivers.... They are of dead earth.  
(Ed. and tr. by George Parker Winship)



Zebulon Montgomery Pike in his travel narratives stated:

Our citizens...will, through necessity, be constrained to limit their extent on the west to the borders of the Missouri and Mississippi, while they leave the prairies incapable of cultivation to the wandering and uncivilized aborigines of the country.  
(Ed. by Elliott Coues)

The first westward settlers passed right over this "desert" to the Far West which was more attractive to them as it bore greater resemblance to the land back east. These travellers also wrote bleak descriptions of the region.

Some settlement, however, gradually spilled out of the wooded river valleys onto the grassland. These settlers, either by accident or ingenuity, discovered the utility of materials around them. The thick prairie sod, although difficult to break with a plow, could be used to construct houses and fences. In some regions stone instead of timber could be used. Someone learned through the scarcity of wood that buffalo chips would burn. Gradually these people applied their experiences to making technological adaptations. The windmill used the ever-present wind to bring the water up from the dry ground; sod-cutters, heavy plows and listers were invented.

In spite of man's achievements on the Plains, there were still destructive elements in the environment. There were occasionally years of drought, perhaps accompanied by grasshopper plagues. In the wet years it often flooded. High winds and tornadoes tore down man's years of efforts in a few minutes. But an optimism prevailed through all disasters. John H. Vansickle, a pioneer in Bourbon County,

Kansas, during the drought of the early 1860's wrote in a letter:

This cuntry has had so many backsets that people gits discourage and that without a cause. We had a failure last year, but what of that. We have a history of this cuntry for 18 years and such drought has never happened before.

At present, man appears to be taking more control over the plains environment. Lessons from the past 100 years have taught our culture to employ soil conservation methods, construct flood control systems, and build storm shelter and tornado warning devices. We are concerned about air pollution, destruction of the tall grass prairie and other changes we are making in the environment. What will be the long-range effects? David F. Costello in The Prairie World asks:

Will the remaining portions of the prairie disappear if man can achieve the fullest potential of the contribution it can make to mankind? Will he be able to meet the caprices of nature in the artificial habitat he has established where once the earth thundered with the pounding feet of countless bison and the sky rang with the clarion calls of geese and the whooping of the great cranes? Only time will tell.

December 1973

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